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Leading Hartford's Force Like a New York Cop

By STACEY STOWE

[HARTFORD](#) - They sat stiffly on metal folding chairs in a scuffed church basement, listening to the man in the uniform trying to reassure them.

But even before the man, Police Chief Patrick J. Harnett, finished addressing the 80 or so middle-aged and elderly people gathered for a community meeting, a pep talk delivered in the lunch-pail accent of his native Bronx, they pounced on him.

"There's somebody here with a Wal-Mart-sized store with our equipment," said Alyssa Peterson, a resident of Hartford's South End, describing a rash of neighborhood burglaries.

Next was Ann Weaver, whose voice trembled with exasperation. "Four times I called to say there were six guys outside my window, selling drugs," she said. "I'm frightened and asked for a drive-by, but no one came."

Chief Harnett's sea blue eyes went steely. He gathered his lanky frame out of the chair and ran a hand over his hair, a chalk-white thatch. The department was "on it," he said. He told them that a rumor that police resources had been diverted to another neighborhood was untrue.

"Listen," he said, ratcheting up the volume over the murmurs. "We care as much about this area as we do anywhere in the city. We know you're taxpayers, working people, we're not going to forget about you."

Fifteen months ago, Chief Harnett, the former narcotics chief of the New York Police Department, took over Hartford's scandal-scarred force. Only a few years earlier, a consultant hired by the city had labeled the department "dysfunctional."

Morale among the rank and file in the 420-member department was low, and no wonder. Before Chief Harnett arrived, there had been five chiefs in as many years. Complicating his job, longstanding tensions remained between the police and the city's mostly poor, mostly black and Latino residents.

Chief Harnett, 61, quickly set about applying lessons learned from 32 years of policing in New York. He began using computers to analyze crimes for patterns to help in deploying officers. He put more officers on the street. He reorganized the department and made supervisors more accountable. And he has reached out to community leaders for help.

"He definitely has credibility and respect," said one of those leaders, the Rev. Cornell Lewis, a therapist.

So far, measured by statistics, results have been mixed. Over all, crime is down, with fewer rapes, robberies and auto thefts. But the homicide rate is up 58 percent from the same period last year, with 19 murders this year, and 123 people were shot this year through Sept. 17, up from 115 in the same

period a year earlier. Much of the violence has occurred in the city's tough North End.

Chief Harnett has urged patience as his plans take hold. "We'll get there," he said, adding that he thought his officers were doing an admirable job. "Day after day, they're seizing guns."

One of the linchpins of his effort is his "turf-based accountability" plan, which he introduced six months after taking over. He divided the city into four districts, each commanded by a captain and including a narcotics team. Two deputy chiefs, one for the North End, the other for the South, were installed.

Deputy Chief Jose L. Lopez Sr., a 22-year veteran who was commander of the southwest district until he was recently promoted, said that before Chief Harnett arrived, there was little follow-through. "When you're responsible for everything, you're accountable for nothing," Chief Lopez said, reciting a Harnett chestnut.

Chief Harnett relies heavily on his weekly meeting with top officers to review data and plot strategy. The sessions are part of the CompStat program, a crime-mapping and management-accountability system that was widely hailed in New York and has been copied by many other departments.

A recent meeting opened with a report of a fatal shooting that morning at a convenience store in the South End. Achilles Rethis, the lieutenant in charge of the department's major crimes division, said a witness had reported a dark blue sport-utility vehicle leaving the scene and three or four males in hooded sweatshirts and face masks.

"Any ballistics?" Chief Harnett asked.

"One fragment," answered Lieutenant Rethis, who had been on the case since 2 a.m.

For more than two hours the dialogue continued and expanded to include other cases, from reports of burglaries to thefts of license plates. Chief Harnett pointed out patterns, leaned on one officer to push for a faster analysis from a ballistics lab, and leavened the tension with praise.

"You're in the hot seat," said Acting Assistant Chief Michael J. Fallon, who was deputy chief of the south division until he was recently promoted. "Knowing that you have to stand before him and your peers, that drives you to be prepared."

Several officers said in interviews that Chief Harnett was respected among the rank and file for his long experience and his direct, plain-spoken manner. "He remembers what it was like to be out there," said Officer Roberto Maldonado, who walks a beat in the South End.

Chief Harnett's efforts have been complicated this year by the sharp rise in shootings, particularly in the North End, where gunfire often punctuates the night. In June, a woman who had stepped out to buy milk for her baby was killed in a drive-by shooting. As of the end of that month, shootings had increased by 54 percent over the same period last year.

Chief Harnett promised results, and that month he increased foot patrols in the North End and deployed detectives from divisions that included narcotics, the gun task force, major crimes and juvenile. The state police supplemented city officers at traffic stops. Over the next three months, shootings declined. There were 19 between June 25 and Aug. 27, compared with 31 during the same

period last year.

"One is too many," Chief Harnett said. "But it's going to improve. We're doing everything we can."

In 1998, Chief Harnett retired from the New York Police Department and took a lucrative security job in the private sector. What enticed him to take on a beleaguered city's department for \$130,000 a year?

"I have a mantra: 'Police do matter,' " he said. "The vast majority of people are law-abiding citizens who want the same things that people who live in wealthier areas do: safety and security and success in sharing in the American dream."

His version of that dream began in the High Bridge section of the Bronx, where he was the child of Irish immigrants. His father was a subway motorman, his mother a housecleaner and cook. He joined the Police Department in 1968 and soon was working in the 48th Precinct in the South Bronx.

He made detective in 1971, after his arrest of four members of the Black Liberation Army who were connected to killings of police officers. He earned degrees in history from Iona College and in criminal justice from the State University of New York. He grew enamored of using computer technology as a tool for crime fighting. Along the way, he married and raised five daughters.

James McShane, director of public safety at Columbia University and a former narcotics commander in New York, said police work "appeals to a certain level of nobility we like to think we have, one that Pat does have."

Those who know him best point to an abiding optimism that runs through Chief Harnett.

William J. Bratton, the chief of police for Los Angeles and a former New York police commissioner, hired him to work as a consultant during his own stint consulting on security around the world but knew it would not be permanent.

"I encouraged him to take the Hartford job, even though he's losing money every day that he sits in that chair," Chief Bratton said. "Like a bunch of us after 9/11, he feels he can contribute and make a difference in public service."

Hartford's mayor, Eddie Perez, said Chief Harnett had "instant credibility" because of his record at the New York police force.

"I also wanted a cop's cop," he said, adding with a laugh, "Oh, and God didn't apply."

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